Oral History Cover Sheet
Name: Doug Benning
Date of Interview: May 16, 2005
Location of Interview: Bailey, Colorado
Interviewer: Dorothe Norton

Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 1970 - 1998

Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Wildlife Biologist, Fort Worth, Texas and Wildlife Biologist/Airplane Pilot "Flyway Biologist", Denver, Colorado

Most Important Projects: Migratory Bird Surveys to satisfy international treaties

Colleagues and Mentors: Chuck Evans, Pete Wilkerson, Mort Smith, Kahler Martinson, Chuck Lawrence, Hank Hansen, Walbert Kennedy, Burnie Palace, Ed Wellein, Jake Chamberlain, Al Noltmier, Ed Addy, Ralph Andrews, Jim Voelzer, Ross Hanson, Art Brazda, Johnny Lynch, Jerry Stoudt, G. Hortin Jensen, Alex Dzubin, Dr. George Saunders, Erv Boeker, Ernie Kuyt, Dan Nieman, John Mulhern, Rollie Sparrowe, and Rod Drewien

Most Important Issues: aerial survey design and techniques

Brief Summary of Interview: early life, parents, interests, high school, college (University of Maine), summer jobs with FWS, military service, Vietnam, family, first professional job with FWS – River Basins Studies (Texas), later work – Division of Management and Enforcement (M&E), training in Washington, D.C., reorganization to the Office of Migratory Bird Management (OMBM), responsibilities, areas of operation (Central Flyway, western Canada and central highlands and southern Pacific coast of Mexico), effect of career on family, important people in his career, changes he's seen in the Service.

DN -- Today is Monday May 16th, 2005 and this interview will be with Doug Benning and Dorothe Norton. So, Doug, first thing I want to know is when and where you were born and tell us about your parents.

DB – That would be Paterson, New Jersey, on March 26, 1942. My mother was Katharine Sherman Benning (1907-1997), raised in the Chicago suburbs and educated at the University of Wisconsin. She was a professional social worker in New York City for a few years before marrying my dad in 1930. My dad was Harvey Henry Benning, Jr. (1909-1976), raised on a farm in upstate New York (Clyde). He attended Cornell University and obtained an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering, graduating at the top of his class. He first worked for Bell Labs in New York City and was instrumental with the trans-Atlantic cable project to Europe and later worked for Radio Aircraft Corp. in northern Jersey and was one of 3 people that developed the original Visual Omni Range (VOR) used as the primary system of navigation for military, commercial and general aviation since the early 1950s and is it remains one of the primary systems in use today. ARC was eventually bought out by Cessna Aircraft before his retirement in 1965.

DN -- So, where did you spend your early years?

DB – I grew up in northern New Jersey (Lincoln Park) and had a keen interest in the out of doors involving hunting, camping and various other outdoor sporting activities. During those years I had a number of summer and after school jobs (paper delivery, mowing lawns, landscaping, gardening, house painting, etc.). As my father was an airplane pilot and co-owned a small aircraft, I developed an interest in flying at an early age and obtained a private pilot's license at the age of 17 and was a student pilot before I was old enough to drive a car. I received a float rating as well while still in high school.

I attended the University of Maine (Orono), obtaining an undergraduate degree in Biology. During my college years, I had a number of interesting summer jobs. Following my freshman year I worked in Baxter State Park (Millinocket, Maine) as an Assistant Ranger at one of the campgrounds. I had two summers working for the FWS in Alaska. The first summer I worked as a Fisheries Aid helping a graduate student on a salmon study on the Chena River out of Fairbanks. The second summer I worked on the Rampart Dam feasibility study on the Yukon River with another Fishery Aid student not far from Beaver. We had an unexpected fly-in visit from Gordy Watson, FWS Regional Director, Starker Leopold, son of Aldo Leopold and professor, University of California, Todd Eberhart, Professor, University of Wisconsin (?), Theron Smith and Ave Thayer, both Pilot/Engineers "Extraordinaire" for FWS in Anchorage. Both summers, my second level supervisor was Chuck Evans, Wildlife Administrator (?), FWS, Anchorage, who I found out in later years was a Flyway Biologist in the Atlantic Flyway back in the late 50's and flew the early Southern Manitoba survey unit that I eventually took over in 1974.

After college, I tried to get into the aviation program with both the Air Force and Navy, but found my eyesight being less than 20-20 barred me from becoming a military pilot. A few months after graduation, the draft board caught up with me and I was drafted into the Army. With my college degree, I was offered Officers Candidate School (OCS) in my elected branch of Armor at Fort Knox, Kentucky. After my training was completed, I was assigned to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri as a Training Officer for a year and was thereafter deployed to Vietnam as an Armor Platoon Leader over nine armored personnel carriers and about 35 men under my command. During my nine months in the field, I lost three men. I served as the Troop Executive Officer during my last three months there.

I was awarded the Purple Heart (hit by shrapnel from an enemy mortar round) and a Bronze Star. I spent a total of three years in the Army.

When I came back home, I got out of the Army and married my first wife (Deloris) of eight years. We had two children, Heather in 1973 and Peter in 1976. Heather attended Cornell College, Grinnell College and the University of Iowa (majoring in history, math and education, obtaining a Master's Degree) and now teaches at Grinnell College. Peter attended the University of Montana (majoring in anthropology and graduating with honors) and is presently in the Montana Army National Guard and has served one tour in Iraq. I married my second wife (Barbara) in 1979 and we adopted a son (Nick) in 1987.

DN -- Was there any special reason why you wanted to work for Fish and Wildlife Service?

DB -- Yes. I always had an interest in wildlife (particularly wildlife behavior) and outdoor work. My first job with the Service came a few months after getting out of the Army. I took a Wildlife Biologist position with River Basin Studies in Fort Worth, Texas on January 1, 1970. Interestingly, that position was a GS 5/1 with an annual income of $5,200. I spent a year and a half there working on an environmental impact statement relating to various Soil Conservation Service PL566 wetland projects.

DN -- Where did you go from there?

DB –An office mate in River Basins at the time, Pete Wilkerson (also a pilot and mentor), suggested a job on the **"**green sheet" was written for my background and interests, which incorporated a Wildlife Biologist and an Airplane Pilot position with a training program based in Washington, D.C.. I applied and got the job. The position involved a two-year training program to become a "Flyway Biologist" in the Division of Management and Enforcement (M&E) within the Branch of Surveys. As I recall, the Branch had only five operational Flyway Biologists at the time and each was assigned various waterfowl surveys throughout the US, Canada and Mexico. My immediate supervisor was Morton (Mort) Smith, Assistant Chief, Branch of Surveys, and his supervisor was R. Kahler Martinson, Chief, Branch of Surveys. The Chief of the Division was Charles (Chuck) Lawrence and his Assistant, Henry (Hank) Hansen. I was officed with some great Law Enforcement folks including Walbert Kennedy**,** and Burnie Pallace**.**

As I only had about 100 pilot flying hours accumulated to that time of my hiring on, a priority in my training involved obtaining my commercial and instrument certification. Some of that training involved Ed Wellein**,** Chief Pilot for the FWS at the time (and previous Flyway Biologist), Jake Chamberlain**,** another previous Flyway Biologist, and Al Noltmier, Regional Pilot Biologist in Washington, North Carolina**.**

When not doing flight training, I was given various field assignments involving aerial and ground surveys of waterfowl, eagles and osprey in the Chesapeake Bay area. I was fortunate to have worked with and trained under many of the early pioneers in the waterfowl and wetlands business such as Ed Addy, Atlantic Flyway Representative and Ralph Andrews, Chief, Wetlands Ecology, PWRC. I also got training in the duck banding operations in the Northwest Territories of Canada during that training period (1971-72) with James (Jim) Voelzer, Flyway Biologist, who later became one of my Section supervisors, then under the Office of Migratory Bird Management (OMBM). Sandwiched in with all this good stuff was a sprinkling of Congressional inquiries, which rather detracted from my quality time there in Washington.

As well, I had extensive training under Rossalius (Ross) Hanson, Flyway Biologist for Southern Saskatchewan (1972-73) and surveying in Mexico (1975 & 1977) and in later years I had the good fortune to receive additional training under Art Brazda, Flyway Biologist, Johnny Lynch, earlier Flyway Biologist, Jerry Stoudt**,** earlier Flyway Biologist, G. Hortin Jensen, Flyway Biologist and Alex Dzubin, Research Biologist, CWS.

DN -- And after your training was up, where did you go next?

DB -- My first and only duty station wound up being Denver, Colorado where the very first Central Flyway Biologist was assigned (Dr. George B. Saunders**)**. Fortunately, I had an opportunity to correspond and phone some with George on his extensive work in old Mexico before he passed away in the early 80's.

There, I was responsible for a number of operational programs. The most important program was serving as Pilot Crew Leader for the annual Southern Manitoba Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey conducted in May every year (1974-78) requiring about four weeks of flying. The second most important survey at the time was the Waterfowl Production Surveys in the same area in July, requiring about three weeks of flying. In later years (1979-98), I was responsible for the Southern Saskatchewan survey unit for these two surveys, an area encompassing roughly the size of Colorado. The third most important program was the Pre-season Duck Banding operation in western Canada. In that program, I served as a banding Crew Leader for various banding stations in the NWT, Alberta or Saskatchewan during the month of August (1973-98) usually involved a full month. In some years I served as the Banding Coordinator for the entire Program for a portion of the month. Other survey responsibilities included serving as the Coordinator for the annual Western Central Flyway Snow and Ross' Goose Productivity Survey for two weeks in southeast Colorado, the panhandle of Texas and east-central New Mexico during late November (1973-98). I also served as the Coordinator for the Annual Mid-Continent White-fronted Goose Productivity Surveys for a week in Kansas during late November (1974-88). I was also the Coordinator for the Annual Spring Mid-Continent White-fronted Goose Survey for a week's flying during mid-March in Nebraska (1975-88). Also, there was the Coordinator for the Annual Spring Mid-Continent Sandhill Crane Survey for another week's flying during late March in Nebraska (1979-88). I served as pilot for the Annual Fall and Winter Waterfowl Surveys, typically a week each during October, November, December and January in Kansas (1974-95), with surveys in October and November cut in the early '80s (the states were blaming the FWS and the Refuge system back then for "short stopping" waterfowl, primarily geese, during the fall migration). I was also responsible for the Winter Waterfowl Survey of the Highlands and southern Pacific Coast of Mexico during my career, which involved 11 surveys and another survey of the West Coast of Mexico. During those years I was involved, the combined Mexico surveys (Gulf Coast, Central Highlands and Pacific Coast) were typically conducted every three years.

Another project involved my serving as a duck wing "Checker" at either the annual Mississippi, Central or Pacific Flyway week-long Wing Bees for the Waterfowl Harvest Surveys Section during late January or early February (1975-2005). Also, I wound up developing a survey and served as Coordinator for the Annual Spring Rocky Mountain Sandhill Crane Survey requiring a week's flying during mid-March in the San Luis Valley of Colorado (1981-93). This survey was eventually replaced with an Annual Fall Pre-Migration Rocky Mountain Sandhill Crane Survey in portions of Wyoming, Idaho and Montana where I again served as Coordinator involving a week's flying during early September (1994-2005).

During my career I was also responsible for updating the Standard Operating Procedures for the Waterfowl Breeding Population and Production Surveys that were published in 1977 and again in 1987. I also designed a "banding carousel" to better organize and hold bands as well as a "collapsible duck trap" to modernize the pre-season banding operations we were involved with in western Canada.

One of the most unusual aspects of the job was that you rarely (typically twice a year) crossed trails with your supervisor, the Branch/Section Chief. You had to be a self-starter once you were assigned a duty station after initial training. Fortunately, I flew with quite a few other FWS pilots during my training period and learned better flying techniques from every one of them. However, being responsible for the many surveys and banding operations we were assigned over such an expanse of real estate, we really had to be on top of our game. You had to be self-reliant, as there usually was no one to seek advice from as you rammed around North America doing your various assignments. Each of the Flyway Biologists had unique personalities, but more importantly, we all eventually figured out how to get the job done right and on time. I think pilots by nature are an adventuresome bunch and, as such, are well-suited to the challenges of this particular job.

DN – What was a typical day like for you?

DB – A typical day in the office was like almost anyone else in the Service. However, since we were out of town much of the year, our time was really short for devoting time to normal office work. Our surveys and banding required that most of our time in the office be devoted to preparation for upcoming projects or preparing reports on those projects just completed. The "paper chase" got to be a real hassle toward the later years (exponential increase in same). We had monthly activities reports, aircraft logs, GOV reports, personnel evaluations, surveys and banding reports at the end of each activity as well as all the regular stuff that almost all Service employees have to deal with. Telephone inquiries were almost impossible to deal with appropriately. Not only did we have certain office time demands, but we were also responsible for arranging for the upkeep and maintenance of an assigned Service airplane, GOV, airboat, outboard motor(s), boat(s) and miscellaneous other survey and banding equipment.

A typical day in the field was considerably different. Here, we'd get up sometimes around 5:00 AM (what I called "zero-dark:30") to get the weather information for the day if we were flying surveys. On our breeding population waterfowl survey, we'd be pre-flighting our assigned plane at 6:00 AM, and in the air by 6:30 AM. The survey itself would run anywhere from three and a half to as much as six hours. Then after putting the plane "to bed" (fueled and arranging any maintenance needed and into a hangar), it was time for a meal, after which we'd transcribe the tape recordings we had made of all the observations of waterfowl and ponds that day. Then we'd have a short break before dinner, after which it was time for another weather briefing as to what to expect for the next day's flight. Then we'd contact the CWS ground Crew Leader to make plans as to what we could fly the next day. The entire ground crew consisted of four vehicles and three personnel per vehicle (12 biologists or student-biologists). The cost to the CWS ground crew, at least in southern Saskatchewan, was in the area of $1,000 a day in those days just in per diem expenses. So the pressure was always there to keep the survey going without any unplanned interruption. There was also the pressure of the timing of the survey relative to the breeding chronology of the birds we were surveying. If we were too early or too late, the counts would be off to varying degrees, so survey timing was critical to get meaningful results. Other surveys had similar timing issues, so there was always a sense of urgency

and we always had to be on station and ready to fly when the time was right for the birds we were working with.

When I first moved to Denver, there was only one FWS pilot in town. Erwin L.(Erv) Boeker was a Research Pilot Biologist for the Division of Research. He took me under his wing, "so to speak" and set me up at a local airport with hangar space and aircraft maintenance. He asked my assistance on a golden eagle study that involved annual aerial nest checks for productivity on a sampling of nearly 100 nests he had located along the Rocky Mountain front range between Albuquerque, New Mexico and Douglas, Wyoming. In addition, he had me serve as observer for one of the annual summer transect surveys of golden eagles in central New Mexico. After Erv's retirement from the Service in 1978 and subsequently finishing a five-year study in Alaska for the National Audubon Society, he did volunteer work for me as an observer on various crane and goose surveys.

I was assigned a variety of aircraft over my career as Flyway Biologist. My FWS training back east was in a wheeled Cessna 180, an amphibious Cessna 185 and an amphibious DeHavilland Beaver. Once assigned to a field station, I started out with a wheeled Cessna 180 and progressed to a new wheeled Cessna 185. Other aircraft flown included a wheeled Cessna 206, an amphibious Cessna 185 and a standard Cessna 182.

My office here in Denver was typical of most others in our Section, in that our group was under Region 9 and as such, we took our orders directly from Washington. Our surveys and banding programs often involved national and international programs and we operated in more than one Region and often in other Flyways. Here in Denver, there were quite a number of Region 9 folks and eventually, we were all officed in the same building.

DN – Was there a time in your career that was particularly memorable?

DB – Perhaps the most memorable assignment I had, involved the radio tracking of whooping cranes during late summer in 1981-83 between their breeding grounds in northeast Alberta and the southern Northwest Territories and their wintering grounds along the Texas Gulf coast. This was a coordinated effort between the CWS with Earnest "Ernie" Kuyt serving as project leader and the FWS pilot biologists and ground crews assisting with the project. In the first year there were two separate air crews following two whooper families. Each year involved anywhere from a few weeks to a month of travel time in September/October. As these assignments involved some interesting folks, a high profile critter and dealt heavily with the whooper's behavioral interactions with other migratory birds (sandhill cranes, eagles, geese, other raptors, etc.), as well as the various weather systems, thermal activities and other climatic and environmental factors, I consider it as one of the most challenging, interesting and rewarding of experiences of my FWS career.

DN -- When did you retire?

DB – After 28 years I retired from FWS on December 3, 1998, but kept one wing in the air, so to speak, doing contract aerial waterfowl surveys for the State on Nebraska (seven years). I've also kept doing volunteer work with the Service since retirement involving a week annually serving as a duck wing "checker" at the Harvest Survey Wing Bees and serving another week annually as back seat observer and photographer on the Fall Pre-Migration Rocky Mountain Sandhill Crane Survey.

DN -- How did your career affect your family?

DB -- As I have indicated, I've been married twice. And initially, I didn't think that the distance and the time away from home were going to be as big a factor as it turned out to be. However, in retrospect, being in travel status for three to four months every year and being gone for as much as a month at a time is not an ideal family situation, as you can imagine. It takes a special lady to put up with such hardship while bringing up a family as well as trying to take care of the "husband responsibilities" in your absence.

DN -- So, did you socialize with the people that you worked with?

DB – As I mentioned earlier, our Section had only five active pilot biologists when I came aboard and never had more than 11 at any one time during my tenure, and due to the scattered office locations around the US and heavy work schedules, we rarely had the opportunity to get together other than at our annual Branch/Section meeting and on the odd occasion when we might work together on a special project. About the only time we spent a lot of time together involved a new trainee coming aboard when some of us were responsible for their training. The training responsibilities typically involved one to two years of being officed together.

However, one of the great things about the job was the annual cycle of surveys and banding that would have us working with counterparts in the FWS, CWS in Canada, Fawna Sylvestry/SEMERNAP in Mexico, State wildlife agencies, and various NGOs. These were mostly very dedicated folks with similar interests and objectives. It was really an extended family every time we'd arrive to take part in our annual assignments. Even the local town's people took an interest in our activities and we always encouraged their participation when feasible. At times, I thought I was having more home-cooked meals "on the road" than I did at home. These folks we worked with, both professionals and locals, made the job very rewarding.

By the way, there were a number of co-workers who inspired me along the way in my career who included Dan Nieman, CWS Surveys Biologist, John Mulhern, Saskatchewan Waterfowl Biologist, Dr. Rolland (Rollie) Sparrowe, Chief, MBMO and, Dr. Roderick (Rod) Drewien, Research Biologist, University of Idaho. These folks were "top shelf" in my book.

DN -- Did you ever experience a dangerous or frightening event?

DB -- Humm… well, flying in itself is inherently dangerous, especially in the type of flying we did as Flyway Biologists i.e., flying "low and slow" (150 feet above the ground at 90-100 mph). If that airplane engine quits, you are not likely to have a very good landing experience. I put in over 9,000 flight hours, 70 to 80% of which was in survey mode. Also, there are the power lines, crop dusting airplanes, unexpected poor weather, mechanical troubles, all of which tend to keep you on high alert almost every minute of your flight. No, I was lucky. I never had the misfortune to "bend" an airplane or injure anyone during my 9,000-hour flight time (27-year flying career with the FWS).

DN -- So, it could be considered dangerous?

DB – You bet, and actually in the early years (before my time), the pilots didn't even get hazardous duty pay like they have today. Only in more recent years have firefighters and pilots had this added compensation, which was just part of the job about the time I came aboard.

DN -- Did you have a mandatory retirement age as a pilot?

DB -- No. Some of the Service pilots have flown into their 60s. I was 56 when I retired from the Service. I think most of the pilots thoroughly enjoy the flying. I always did. Between the flying and the freedom to "run your own show" when it came to the various programs, the job was a real kick.

DN -- Where do you see the Service heading in the next 10 years or so?

DB – I don't know about the next 10 years, but during my tenure I was a bit discouraged. Today, you see more and more "specialists" coming along the pike. Back when I came aboard, there were more "generalists" that demonstrated multi disciplines. There was more of a feeling of "family" within the Service. Even before I got out of college I remember the guys in Alaska when I was doing summer work up there. All of them seemed to know each other's work and they were all working in unison on that Rampart Dam feasibility study with a common purpose. I found the same thing with my time in River Basin Studies in Fort Worth and in my next assignment with M&E. In that organization there were two Branches as the name implied. The Enforcement Branch had the bulk of manpower (agents) and emphasis, while the Surveys Branch had only six or seven pilot biologists with survey responsibilities all over North America. When there was a need for assistance on the surveys and banding, the agents were always there. It wasn't in their job description, but they were always there along side the pilot biologists. Quite often, they were even the experienced crew leaders on some of the surveys and banding operations. We worked hard together and everyone seemed to get along famously. There was no bickering about working on weekends and overtime during the week with typical work days running 10-14 hours, of which there were plenty. Back before my time, there was absolutely no compensation for same. A few of the agents were pilots/agents, and those that were, got leaned on heavily to help out with the aerial surveys. It's amazing to me that marriages held together so well back in those days, because there was much time spent (50-80%) away from home.

Since the breakup and reorganization of M&E into the Office of Migratory Bird Management and Division of Law Enforcement in about 1980, the Service has relied on regional participation to help out on both the surveys and banding operations. The dedication doesn't seem to be there any more and understandably so. These folks have another primary job that rarely includes extended travel and their families are not used to long periods with their husbands or wives "out of town" for weeks at a time. Again, it wasn't part of their position description. We rarely got repeat observers or banders for more than one or two years. My take on this was that the quality of the program has suffered ever since the split of M&E.

DN – What would you say was the most memorable aspect of your career?

DB – The job, though very demanding, was very rewarding. I'm not aware of another job in the Service that provides the gratification one gets from having a responsibility that gives you almost total control of a project from start to finish. You design the survey, organize the program, obtain the assistants you need to help with the project, conduct the operation, and finally write up a report as to the results. You don't have to deal with the never-ending bottlenecks that seem to permeate other projects in the Service. Yes, it was a fabulous career and I enjoyed (almost) every minute of it. I was frustrated with many things along the way, as one always is, but when you sit back, particularly now after retirement, and look back at it -- you know it was a "one in a million" job opportunity.

DN – Did you receive any special awards during your career?

DB -- I received a number of Special Achievement Awards, but the most notable award was the Meritorious Service Award received in 1995, which I believe is the second highest award given within the Service.

DN -- Well, I want to thank you for your time, Doug. I appreciate that you had time to do this.

D Benning c:\my docs\wordfiles\personal\Oral History edit.doc 1/29/2012

(a revision of -- http://www.pacificflyway.gov/Documents/Pfc_history.pdf)